Students Need a Balanced Reading Program

A sound reading program combines skills mastery with reading for personal pleasure and information. A valid assessment of reading instruction looks at how well and how often students read.

In our concern to set verifiable standards for reading achievement, we often act as if the only legitimate goal of reading instruction is for children to pass a minimum competency test or to master an essential skills list. In many classrooms, children spend 60 to 70 percent of their allocated reading time completing commercial workbooks and other materials that focus on discrete skills (Anderson 1984, Fisher et al. 1978). Perhaps this emphasis on the easily measured outcomes of instruction is one reason that many children who can decode have trouble with the higher levels of reading comprehension (NAEP 1981), and that an estimated 40 percent of the Americans who can read books choose not to (Toch 1984).

The Reductionist View of Reading

Teachers are under tremendous pressure to define reading instruction as little more than guided practice through a series of skills and reading achievement as little more than scores on standardized tests. This reductionist view of reading reduces the goals of reading instruction from developing
students who love to read to producing students with an "identifiable level of reading competence" (Shannon 1983, p. 69).

The reductionist point of view is not some esoteric theory of reading debated by a few isolated academics. This view is evident in the scope and sequence charts of almost all the current basal reading series that determine how 75 to 95 percent of instructional time in reading is spent (EPRI 1977, Fisher et al. 1978), and in the objectives list on almost all standardized achievement tests. Finally, this view is also evident when legislators meet to set state-level reading policy (Winograd in press). Kentucky, for example, recently passed a bill that states, in part: "By January 1, 1987, the state board of education shall assure that each pupil in the public schools of the Commonwealth is taught and is mastering the essential skills necessary to function in each basic skill area..." (KS Bill 169, 1984).

The reductionist view of reading dominates how reading is taught and assessed. Although the reductionist view of reading is pervasive for a number of reasons, three are particularly important: the need for a workable management system, the need for an efficient accountability system, and the limitations of the kind of language used to talk about reading instruction.

1. **The need for a system of classroom management.** One purported advantage of defining reading as a series of subskills is that it enables the teacher more efficiently to instruct groups of children (Johnson and Pearson 1975, Otto 1977). The teacher is supposed to separate those children who are progressing nicely along the hierarchy of skills from those who are progressing more slowly. The children making good progress can then move on to more difficult skills, while the children who are lagging behind can spend more time on the activities they need.

2. **The need for a system of accountability.** The reductionist view of reading is also popular because it lends itself easily to the demands of accountability. If one views reading as a series of hierarchically arranged subskills, then it is relatively easy to set up a series of specific testable objectives and monitor students' mastery of them. These student data can, in turn, be used to assess how well teachers and schools are performing. All of these results can then be reported to the public as proof that the schools are doing their job.

3. **The limitations of the language used in instruction.** The language used in instructional systems is best suited to describing those low-level aspects of reading that can be easily measured and stated in the form of testable objectives (Otto 1977, Winograd and Osborn 1985). Because it is difficult to use this language to talk about motivation, interest, or other important aspects of reading, we often choose not to talk about them at all.

We are not underestimating the importance of a good system of managing instruction, the need for accountability, or the importance of a high degree of precision in instructional language. Our point is that some powerful political and educational forces support the view that reading is little more than a series of testable objectives and reading achievement is little more than a score on a standardized test. Let's consider some of the crucial flaws in the reductionist view of reading.

**Problems with the Reductionist View of Reading**

Researchers have identified a number of shortcomings of the reductionist view of reading (e.g., Johnson and Pearson 1975; Shannon 1983, 1984), but three are particularly critical: an inaccurate view of reading, an overemphasis on skills, and the reduction of teachers to managers of materials.

1. **An inaccurate view of reading.** The most serious criticism of the view of reading as a series of hierarchically arranged, easily tested subskills is that it is inaccurate (Wixson and Peters 1984). The skills, especially the comprehension skills, listed in various scope and sequence charts are not subskills in the theoretical sense of separate, verifiable components of the reading process. Research has yet to identify any series of subprocesses resembling a hierarchy of subskills (Rosenshine 1980). The skills listed in various scope and sequence charts are pragmatic attempts at identifying aspects of reading that can be used as objectives to focus instruction or to provide evidence of achievement.

Using the skills as a flexible, general guide for instruction is reasonable. Using them as the sole criterion in a system of classroom management or instructional accountability is not. Lists of skills may provide teachers with the appearance of a classroom management system, and they may provide the public with the appearance of an
accountability system, but they do so at a cost. The costs that concern us the most are the second and third critical flaws in the reductionist view of reading.

2. Overemphasis on skills. Current research has emphasized that fluent reading "combines elements of both skill and will" (Paris et al. 1983, p. 304). It is easy to understand why teachers become overly concerned with skill rather than with development. Skill development is what is stressed in the majority of commercial materials. Indeed, too many materials are developed to fit the skills rather than fit the context of the child's reading, and, most important, introduce children to books that are not well written and worth reading (Bernstein 1985, Osborn et al. 1985).

3. The reduction of the teacher to a manager of materials. When reading is fractionated into a complex series of subskills plotted on a scope and sequence chart, teachers tend to depend more on manuals and guides than on their own good sense of what constitutes sound reading instruction. Add to this the tremendous influence exerted by end-of-unit tests, standardized tests, and other means of accountability, and it is easy to see that most of the teacher's decisions about what to teach and when to teach it have already been made by higher authorities. As Shannon (1983, p. 71) puts it, teachers "control only the level of precision with which they apply commercial materials." This reduction of teachers' decision-making power has been referred to as the deskilling of teachers and it is a particularly insidious result of the reductionist view of reading.

The teacher's role in reading instruction should entail more than giving assignments and checking ditto sheets. Teachers need to explain and model certain aspects of the reading process, provide support and encouragement when the going gets rough, and, most important, introduce children to the right books at the right time. Unfortunately, in a system that emphasizes skills mastery, the meeting between child and book is almost always postponed in favor of practicing some skill that will later be tested.

The Strategic View of Reading
Let us now consider an alternative view of reading. In a sense, we have been talking about the strategic view as we have examined some of the weaknesses of the reductionist view of reading. Here we focus more clearly on three essential aspects of this perspective: the importance of the reader's purpose, the importance of self-monitoring, and the importance of motivation.

1. The importance of the reader's purpose. The view of reading as a strategic activity emphasizes the purposefulness, the goal-directedness, and the meaningfulness inherent in the reading process. Paris, Lipson, and Wixson (1983) offer these insights into what constitutes a strategic reader:

   Strategic behavior connotes intentionality and purpose on the part of the learner. It suggests that a person choose one alternative action over another… In order for an action to be strategic, it must be selected by the agent from alternative actions and it must be intended to attain the specific goal. Strategies are deliberate actions… In a sense, strategies are skills under consideration…

   The point to remember is that reading is 'strategic, not behavior removed from its context and function' (p. 294). In one sense, then, there is no predetermined list of reading strategies out there waiting to be put in a scope and sequence chart and taught to children regardless of context. Rather, children must be taught how to use comprehension skills in a strategic manner to achieve legitimate, personally relevant goals. This requires, of course, that children spend more time reading legitimate materials for legitimate purposes and less time practicing discrete skills in isolation.

2. The importance of self-monitoring. The strategic view of reading also emphasizes the role that self-monitoring plays in fluent reading (Baker and Brown 1980, Winograd and Johnston 1982). Good readers know when they are making sense out of text and when they are not. Poor readers, in contrast, seem to have particular trouble with this aspect of fluent reading.
Poor readers may have trouble monitoring the effectiveness of their reading because they may have different expectations of what reading is all about. Some evidence for this hypothesis comes from a study of the differences between good and poor readers' understanding of the reading process (Canney and Winograd 1979). Good and poor readers in grades 2, 4, 6, and 8 were asked, "What makes a good reader?" The answers of good readers emphasized the meaningfulness of print; for example, "A good reader is someone who is learning about people and the world." Poor readers, in contrast, gave answers like, "A good reader is someone who can say all the words fast without stumbling," which indicated that they perceived reading as an exercise in decoding rather than a process for obtaining meaning. The results from this and similar studies (e.g., Meyers and Paris 1978) indicate that poor readers especially need to spend time engaged in purposeful reading. We cannot expect children to learn to monitor their own reading unless they understand that reading is more than a series of skill exercises to be completed at school.

3. The importance of motivation. All reading does not have to be fun, but it does have to be worth the effort. It should not, by implication, be painful. Reading that is defined as the mastery of a series of measured objectives in order to produce children who can read and who want to read. This understanding needs to be reinforced, supported, and defended. Teachers should be provided with the kinds of materials and objectives that will enhance rather than restrict their ability to make judgments about the teaching of reading. The trend toward the deskilling of teachers needs to be reversed.

The following example illustrates how administrators can fail to support teachers' expertise (Shannon 1983). Several 3rd grade teachers had complained to the central administration that some of the objectives in the basal series were too difficult for the children. As the teachers put it, "Even the good ones had difficulty passing the tests" (p. 80). The teachers then appealed to the author of the basal series, who revealed that there had been a number of similar complaints and that the objectives had been moved to a higher level in the new edition.

When the teachers approached the central administrators with this information, the administrators agreed to make a change when the new series was accepted. Until then, the teachers were to carry on as usual.

Teach children about the strategic nature of reading. In recent years researchers have attempted to teach students how to use various comprehension strategies such as summarizing what has been read (Hare and Borchardt 1984) or drawing inferences (Hansen and Pearson 1983). A common element in these studies is the importance placed on involving students as active participants in their own learning (Brown et al. 1981). One way to do this is to provide students with more complete explanations about the comprehensions strategies they are being taught. The explanations should focus on helping students understand what the strategy is, why it should be used, how to use it, when and where it is to be used, and how to evaluate its effectiveness (Winograd and Hare in press). If students better understand the purposes and benefits of reading strategies, perhaps they will take more control over their own learning.

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Spend more time on real reading. The more time children spend reading for worthwhile purposes, the more adept they will become at setting and fulfilling their own goals. Characteristically, strategic readers are intensely aware of the satisfaction that can be obtained from reading. Teachers can attempt to develop within their students an appreciation of the value of reading in a number of ways, including reading aloud to students, involving them in functional activities requiring reading and writing, and providing time and support for free reading of good books.

A good reading program combines direct, focused instruction on selected aspects of the reading process with plenty of time for reading for pleasure and information. What we have labeled the reductionist view of reading is the tendency to focus solely on the skills of reading. Even the most avid proponents of the subskills approach never intended for skills to be the whole program. For example, Otto (1977, p. 195), developer of the Wisconsin Design System, stated that "it is utter nonsense to teach skills for their own sake." Yet classroom observation studies indicate that reading instruction is often reduced to skills instruction alone (Durkin 1978-1979).

Educate the public about what is important in reading instruction. Informed public support is essential if we are to keep the pressures exerted by essential skills lists and minimum competency tests from diverting our attention from those harder-to-test but equally important aspects of reading.

One way to educate the public is by making meaningful reading visible to parents and the community (Barnard and Hetzel 1982). Book fairs, book clubs, and other such projects convey the message, "Legitimate reading is important."

Recent issues of The Reading Teacher contain a wealth of home-school reading activities, which can make a difference in how reading is perceived by students, teachers, and parents. But they can only be successful with the support of principals, reading supervisors, and others in leadership positions.

Combining the Skill and Will of Reading

Taking a balanced approach to reading instruction means guarding against the tendency to define reading, especially reading comprehension, solely as a series of subskills, and to define reading achievement solely as scores on a standardized test. It favors cultivating the view of reading as a strategic activity that requires intentionality, interest, and motivation on the part of the learner. Certainly, there are specific aspects of reading that can be identified for instructional purposes; certainly, good readers score higher on standardized tests than do poor readers. But if we really want to produce fluent readers who like to read, then we must ensure that reading instruction addresses both the skill and will of reading and that reading assessment considers both how well and how often students read.

References


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Peter Winograd is associate professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, University of Kentucky, Dickey Hall, Lexington, KY 40506-0017; and Marilyn Greenlee is a doctoral candidate, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506.